The Innovation “Frame”

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Professional circumstances have given me a monster backstage pass to see how innovation really works in many countries around the world, as well as in our own. I want to bring this knowledge home to fuel a national conversation on these important issues. And so with these words I am pleased to launch “Innovation Nation” as my offering to the blogosphere.

I begin my first HuffPost with some puzzlement. It is January 18, 2008, the presidential campaign has been in full swing for longer than most of us would like to admit, and the “innovation” issue is still conspicuously MIA from discourse and debate.

We’ve had the Iraq “frame,” and now the recession and change “frames.” But what about the Innovation “frame?” Are we just not getting the importance of innovation? Vannevar Bush, presidential science advisor, said it best in 1947, “A nation that loses its science and technology will lose control of its destiny.” More recently the National Academy of Science referred to the problem as a “gathering storm.” And in my own recent book, Innovation Nation, I state that America is losing its innovation edge with profound implications for our security and prosperity as a nation.

Is anybody listening out there in leader-land?

History will show America’s current innovation melt-down to have been an egregious self-inflicted wound. I would need ten times this space just to recite a list of dismal facts about how poorly our national innovation system is performing. Some headlines: our young scientists are abandoning their careers with increasing frequency, talent is increasingly not coming to our storied shores, our public education and R & D are showing significant erosion, we’re strapped for cash, other countries are leading us in a growing number of scientific fields, and nobody seems to care.

The innovation frame in national politics has been conspicuous by its absence. Instead, we have heard increasingly frequent (and tedious) calls for change. But change is driven by innovation, which is the wellspring of progress. Change has to be about something or it is
just novelty. In other words, if change is the answer we seek, what is the question? And, it is a multitude of changes - driven by innovation capability and harnessed to a compelling national idea - that leads to transformation. Otherwise, change is just...change.

Wise corporate leaders have always known that change is galvanized in the presence of a set of big ideas that set the vector and allow countless instances of innovation to drive it. We need to have a sense of where we are going if we are to arrive at a meaningful destination.

I have three hypotheses about why we haven’t heard more about innovation.

1) It’s hard to define. True enough - most people still have a hard enough time distinguishing between creativity and innovation, let alone defining the role of entrepreneurship in innovation. Many policy makers will make the elementary mistake of equating innovation with science and high tech, when in fact it has to do with a broader array of business model and process innovation that can be driven by design and the arts.

2) It’s hard to talk about. If we can’t define it, how can we hope to have a meaningful conversation about it?

3) We don’t have the right national narrative for innovation. This gets to the heart of the matter. Talking about innovation feels a little like talking about preventive medicine: we know it’s important, but it never seems to reach the highest priority level. On the other hand, throw in a little chest pain and it’s time to call 911. That’s why I have called our present situation a Silent Sputnik. Unlike the original Sputnik in 1957 that galvanized our country into action with its first (and sadly last) national innovation drive, our present situation lacks urgency and therefore it’s no surprise that we’re not taking needed action.

Which brings us to the presidential election. Whether the agenda is innovation or change - it must start at the top. There is no company that has succeeded at a large-scale change or innovation effort without involvement and advocacy from the CEO. Well, we are voting for the equivalent of a CEO of this country in November and I think we deserve to hear from the candidates as to how they view innovation in much greater detail. We need answers from them to such questions as:

- What they plan to do about our innovation “problem” in all its many-headed glory: from science policy to education, strategic investment and the formation of new kinds of global alliances.
• How they see the process of developing a meaningful national strategy for innovation.
• How they plan to allocate stewardship and responsibility for executing that strategy.
• What kind of metrics they plan to use and how they will define success.
• What they plan to invest in.
• Perhaps most importantly, what is their point of view. How do they connect the dots into a diagnosis of our innovation “problem” is and how do they frame our innovation challenge in light of a larger national narrative?

We urgently need a robust national conversation on these issues. As a nation, we deserve it. And if I have anything to do about it, we will get one.

In posts to come, I’m going to cover such topics as how innovation “works” in other countries such as Finland and China that are racing for a new innovation high ground. I’m going to document what’s going on in this country - both the hopeful signs as well as the dismal facts. And in doing so, I hope to enlist you in helping to build Innovation Nation right here in the United States of America.